

¹South Bay Charter's Handbook

By Bob Diamond

The Boats

Spinnaker Sailing has boats for day sailing and for overnight cruising. The boats from 22 to 25 feet are ideal for a day sail in the South San Francisco Bay. These consist of Santana-22's, Cal-24's, and Merit 25's. All of these boats can carry as many as 5 people but are more comfortable with 3 or 4. They can also be easily short-handed sailed with 2 people and can even be single handed by experienced skippers. The boats at Spinnaker have passed voluntary safety inspections by the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary and are equipped with all required safety equipment. Additional equipment such as anchor and rode, flashlight, and spare line are aboard each boat and copies of the local navigation charts are available in the office, free for the asking.

The boats larger than 25 feet are more extensively equipped and are better suited to overnight cruising around San Francisco Bay. These boats all have inboard Diesel engines, electrical systems, VHF radios, etc. Most have full galley facilities and a few have additional amenities such as stereo systems, auto pilot, microwave oven, etc. These boats can be comfortably used for trips of two or more days.

The need for additional equipment depends on how extensive the charter. Personal sailing gear is required at every level however Spinnaker Sailing provides Type III PFD's with each boat. Some sailors like to bring their own Type V PFD's for greater comfort. Porta-Potties for the smaller boats are available on request at no additional charge.

Sailors on overnight or longer cruises should bring their own bedding or sleeping bags. Some of the larger boats have dishes and cooking utensils. These should be checked prior to the day of the charter so sailors can bring what is needed that may not be part of the boat inventory.

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Day Chartering

The most popular day chartering activity is sailing north to the San Mateo Bridge and back. This can generally be done in 4 hours or less even in the small boats. For short sails, non-members at Spinnaker Sailing Club can get half-day charter rates on weekdays. Club members generally don't pay for boat usage so daily rates don't apply. Half day charters start officially at 2:00 p.m. but there is a one-hour grace period for earlier check in if the boat is not being used in the morning. It's okay to sail north beyond the San Mateo Bridge but it's not advisable to go south. The channel in the south approaching the Dumbarton Bridge gets narrow, is not marked and the sides are steep. Additionally, it's usually a beat to get back to the Redwood City area and there is little traffic so assistance may be hard to obtain should it become necessary.

The area between Redwood City and the San Mateo Bridge is a great day sailing area. The wind comes up almost every afternoon from early spring to mid fall. The wind chop isn't excessive except perhaps mid channel when there is an ebbing current opposing the strong northwesterly wind. The water is deep enough for sailing at least a mile wide at the Redwood City Channel entrance and gets wider approaching the San Mateo Bridge. It doesn't get too shallow until a couple hundred yards from the bridge causeway. In the winter, light wind can be expected most of the time when there are no storms. During winter storms, the wind builds from the south and shifts to the northwest as each cold front passes. After the front, there is often a period of good northwest wind and clear sky with puffy white cumulous clouds. This can last a day or so unless another storm is following close behind the previous one.

When conditions get too rough on the Bay, there's usually good sailing in Redwood City Channel. The minimum width is 300 feet and there are two turning basins wide enough to allow the largest ships to turn around. The wind generally blows across the channel from the marshes west of the channel. This makes for nice reaching up and down the channel with in the strong breeze yet smooth water.

Going past the San Mateo Bridge

There's plenty of good sailing north of the San Mateo Bridge. Sailors must be aware of the shallow water extending from the western tower of the main span of the bridge northward past the red marker number "8A". There's one other shoal to look out for, the San Bruno Shoal which is covered by as little as 2 feet of water at low tide. San Bruno Shoal is located east of the main channel adjacent to markers "4" and "6". Sailboats don't have to stay in the marked channel but should avoid the area of San Bruno Shoal.

Coyote Point Harbor makes a good destination for those going north of the San Mateo for a day's sail. There is a regional park with picnic tables and barbecues. There is also a snack shop at the golf course. Transient boats can be tied up front of the harbor office while slip assignments are obtained. Check with the Spinnaker Sailing staff for more detailed instructions for entering Coyote Point Harbor.

When coming back to Redwood City, it's important to keep red markers "12" and "2" to starboard but it's hard to see them from as far away as the bridge. Just head for the left-hand (eastern) end of the Dumbarton Bridge and the markers will come into view as you head down the South Bay Channel toward Redwood City. Be sure to stay far enough to the left to leave all the red markers to starboard. A magnetic course of 105° will also take you straight down the channel.

Overnight Chartering

After a few day charters you might be ready for more extensive cruising in The Bay. There are lots of harbors and marinas where you take a boat to spend the night. Sailors who enjoy camping out will like the economy of overnight cruising in the smaller boats but the features of the larger boats will make it more comfortable. Spinnaker offers a special weekender rate for the period of Friday evening through Sunday evening. The weekender cost is discounted by 10% from the cost of chartering two weekend days. Friday night is included at no extra charge. At other times, there's a 10% discount for two or more consecutive days and a 20% discount for 5 or more consecutive days.

Places to go include anchorages, private yacht clubs, public marinas and parks. The best anchorage in the Bay is Clipper Cove, also known as Treasure Island Cove or Yerba Buena Island Cove. Clipper Cove is

the name given when the Pan Am Clipper flying boats were based there. This is the coolest place to anchor during heat waves. Be sure to enter at the northern end of the mouth of the cove to avoid the shoal that extends from Yerba Buena Island at the entrance of the cove. Inside the cove, there's plenty of room to swing at anchor adjacent to Treasure Island Marina. A cool breeze blows right over the causeway that connects Treasure Island to Yerba Island but the water is flat and very well protected.

There are dozens of public marinas around the Bay. Some are privately owned and some are municipal but almost all accept boats for overnight stays. A few harbors belong to private yacht clubs. These are only open to their members and members of reciprocating private yacht clubs. The [California Boater's Guide to the Harbors & Marinas of the San Francisco Bay, Delta, Outer Coast & Hawaii](#) is a good guide to harbors with facility descriptions, maps, phone numbers and other useful information. There's a copy in the Spinnaker office for reference.

Popular destinations include South Beach Harbor near Pac Bell Park in San Francisco, Schoonmaker Point Marina in Sausalito, and Bellena Isle Marina in Alameda. These and many others have restaurants nearby and other fun things to do.

There are also a few parks where boats are welcome... notably Angel Island State Park. This park has picnic areas, nature areas and historical areas dating back beyond the civil war. There are slips available in Ayala Cove, first come, first served during the daytime. These slips must be vacated at sunset. There are mooring buoys in the cove where boats can stay overnight. There is a use fee for the slips and mooring buoys. Be sure to arrive early on summer weekends as the moorings tend to fill by midday on Saturday.

There's quite a list of possible things to do. These include harbors with restaurants in San Francisco, Sausalito, Tiburon, Richmond, Berkeley, Emeryville, Oakland, Alameda, and San Leandro. In Oakland at Jack London Square there's Yoshi's for Jazz. Pac Bell Park is right at South Beach Harbor in San Francisco. Sail to a Giants game! During a multiple day charter it's possible to sail as far as Vallejo or even into the California Delta. If you have an idea and would some advise, talk to the staff at Spinnaker Sailing. Talk to us even if you're only curious about cruising.

San Francisco Bay Conditions

The sailing conditions on San Francisco vary by time of year, time of day and even by exact location. The windy season begins by mid spring and lasts until September. In the fall the sailing gets mellower and mellower until, by winter-time, there are many days when there's hardly enough wind to make sailing worthwhile. But there are a few good days in winter, usually after storms have passed through the area. The spring and summer is the windy when we get small craft advisories almost every afternoon. The wind peaks mid to late afternoon and locally tends to be a little stronger at the San Mateo Bridge. The normal direction is from the northwest but it tends to blow a little more from the west as it gets stronger in the afternoon.

There are some spots that routinely get stronger wind. Right through the Golden Gate towards Berkeley, it's called the "slot" because so much wind is forced through the area between San Francisco and Marin County. There are other areas known for strong wind. The San Bruno Gap blows through the area near Oyster Point Marina and The Crystal Springs Gap focuses wind from about Coyote Point to the San Mateo Bridge. It's important to note that where there is strong wind blowing over a greater distance of water, there will be larger waves. This is called "fetch". For a given wind strength, the longer the fetch, the larger the waves.

Boats usually don't have to travel far in San Francisco Bay to find shelter from the wind and the waves. On the south side of the "slot" there's some shelter behind Treasure Island and directly behind The City. On the north side there's shelter behind Angel Island and Tiburon. The wind in one area can be 30 to 35 knots while a few hundred yard away it might be only 10 knots. Knowing what lies ahead, smart sailors will find the easiest places to hoist sails or reef.

There's more commercial traffic in The North Bay including tug boats, ferries and ships. All of them are a lot faster than small sailboats. It can take as long for a small boat to cross a shipping channel as it takes a large ship to travel up to two miles. Keep a constant look out for all commercial traffic and especially the ships which can not deviate from their channels. You need to start moving out of their path well before they become close to you. Get a chart briefing from any of the various members of the Spinnaker staff who are familiar with North Bay commercial traffic patterns before heading there for the first time.

Fog can be an additional factor in the North Bay. Sometimes the bottom of the fog layer is far enough above the water that you can see traffic on the bay but sometimes it comes right down to the deck. When this happens, extraordinary measures must be taken to avoid colliding with other vessels or obstacles. The fog tends to limit itself to the area from the Golden Gate to the Berkeley side of The Bay between Richmond and Emeryville. It also tends to be heavier in the west. Transiting this area when the fog is on the deck is extremely dangerous and should be avoided if at all possible. If you're stuck in the fog have to move, try to stay completely out of shipping lanes or if you do have to cross one, do so at right angles and with extreme caution. If you have VHF radio, you can listen to channel 14 to learn what the commercial shipping traffic is doing.

When to Plan a Cruise

During most of the season, you can count on the afternoon northwest wind in the South Bay and wind coming more from the west in the North Bay. The other significant variable is the tidal current. The ideal plan is to have the current going with you in all directions but that's not always possible. If you can just plan to have the current in your favor at the critical times, you'll have a great advantage. There are places in the Bay where the current is stronger than elsewhere. These places can be seen in the current charts of San Francisco Bay. There are also days every month when the current is stronger than on other days. When the tides are the most extreme, it's called "spring tides". The least extreme tides are called "neap tides". The tidal current is of course strongest during the spring tides. Tide and current tables are available on the web and in booklet form at Spinnaker and many other marine facilities.

If possible, plan a cruise so the current is favorable or at least not too unfavorable when you're going to be passing through areas where the current is strongest. The tides and currents tend to be in opposite phase every week. If it turns out the current is going to be unfavorable for your passage one week; you can expect it to be favorable the following week. That's assuming you plan for approximately the same departure time. Modern cruising often involves a lot of motoring. Accept the necessity of motoring, especially if your going to start early in the morning before the wind comes up.

Fueling

The inboard Diesel powered boats carry enough fuel for just about any cruise of a few days duration. More fuel is available at the many fuel docks located north of Redwood City. The outboard powered boats normally only carry enough fuel for 3 or 4 hours of motoring. Spinnaker can provide an extra container of fuel upon request, and if necessary, cruisers can purchase more gasoline along the way. If "50:1 outboard mix" is not available, outboard users will have to mix the new gas with outboard motor oil to make the proper mixture required by outboard engines. Charterers are reimbursed for fuel purchased by returning the receipt to Spinnaker.

Suggested 2 day trip

South Beach Harbor at Pier 40 in San Francisco is a great destination for a first overnight cruise. It's a reasonable distance from Redwood City. At about 20 miles, it's only 4 hours away even at the stately speed of 5 knots. The harbor is easy to find, easy to get in and out, and easy to maneuver in. There are facilities such as heads and showers and lots of restaurants and other shops ashore.

We suggest you plan your trip on a weekend when there is morning maximum ebb approximately between 9:00 and 10:30. This will give you a favorable current heading up to San Francisco in the morning and favorable current coming back in the afternoon the next day. If you leave Redwood City as late as the time of maximum current, you'll be arriving about the time the current goes slack. This would give you plenty of time to get to South Beach and may even give you enough time to sail past Pier 40 and the Bay Bridge to check out the North Bay, Alcatraz Island, etc. before settling in at South Beach Harbor.

Make your reservations with harbor office at (415) 495-4911. The overnight fee is \$1.00 per foot. There is also a \$50 key deposit, which can be done with an authorized credit card. The harbor master monitors VHF channel 16 if you need to call via marine radio.

Pac Bell Park is within walking distance and there are several restaurants in the area. Take advantage of the extra time the next day to explore the North Bay a little before heading back to Redwood City. Just allow about 4 hours of sailing time from the Bay Bridge for the trip south. It's likely you'll have the wind in your favor the whole way and if it's a normal spring or summer day there will be lots of it. What a way to finish a weekend sail!